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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 000767

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E AND PRM/AFR
LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA-WATCHER
CJTJF-HOA FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/21/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PBTS](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [DJ](#) [ER](#)
SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI: HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH INTERVIEWS ERITREAN
DEFECTORS

Classified By: PolOff Rebecca K. Hunter for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Representatives of Human Rights Watch (HRW) granted permission to interview Eritrean defectors/deserters now under GODJ control reported that there are currently 46 defectors/deserters in Djiboutian custody, along with an unknown number of prisoners of war. HRW representatives said that while the defectors/deserters were satisfied with their current detention conditions, they were extremely worried about the consequences they might face if the GODJ relinquished them back to Eritrean control. END SUMMARY.

46 DEFECTORS; PLUS POWS

¶2. (C) Charge and PolOff met on September 18 with Chris Albin-Lacky and Leslie Leskow of Human Rights Watch, who were in Djibouti for a five-day visit. Albin-Lacky had previously visited Djibouti in July, when he met with National Security Chief Hassan Said Khaireh. Khaireh then reportedly "opened doors" to allow HRW access to interview defectors/deserters on this trip. Albin-Lacky said that there were currently 46 defectors/deserters in Djiboutian custody at Nagad Detention Center, up from 26 during his July visit. Albin-Lacky said that there was an additional group of Eritrean prisoners of war (POWs) being held at the adjacent Nagad Police Academy. He did not know how many POWs there were, and HRW did not visit or interview any POWs.

¶3. (C) Albin-Lacky and Leskow reported that the deserters/defectors were being held in "reasonable" accommodations, and noted that several of the individuals they interviewed had gone "out of their way" to praise Djibouti's treatment of them. The defectors/deserters were reportedly allowed twenty-four hour access to outdoor areas, "at least for the duration of Ramadan," through the end of September. Albin-Lacky and Leskow understood that the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) had made one visit to the deserters/defectors.

"OPPORTUNISTIC CROSSING"

¶4. (C) Leskow and Albin-Lacky reported that the sample of defectors/deserters they interviewed represented a mix of ethnicities, and ranged in age from about twenty-one to early fifties. At least one was an ethnic Somali, and two were ethnic Oromos. Some had fought in Eritrea's independence "Struggle." Others were reportedly of Eritrean parentage, but had lived in Ethiopia all their lives until they were expelled in 1998 and immediately conscripted by Eritrea. All were part of the Eritrean military. Albin-Lacky and Leskow said that many of the interviewees seemed to have made

"opportunistic crossings"--in other words, they may not have been directly involved in the Djibouti-Eritrea border standoff, or even assigned to units posted to the area, but saw the situation as a useful pretense to be near the border, and then slip over. Many of the interviewees had been trying to escape the Eritrean military for some time, and some reported having served prison time after previous failed escape attempts.

FEAR OF BECOMING A BARGAINING CHIP

¶5. (C) According to the HRW representatives, the GODJ "doesn't know what to do with the deserters/defectors." Albin-Lacky said that while the GODJ did not want to repatriate the deserters/defectors, they also did not want to "house and feed them indefinitely," nor give them refugee status in Djibouti. All of the interviewees were reportedly frightened of being handed back over to Eritrean control, or being used as a bargaining chip to recover Djiboutian POWs. Several interviewees recounted an April Eritrean military circular, read aloud to all troops in Eritrea, warning that in the future, all deserters would be shot by GSE, not put in prison. Albin-Lacky and Leskow asked about the possibility for U.S. resettlement of the defectors/deserters. They also asked Post to push the GODJ to allow UNHCR access to the defectors/deserters; while clarifying that it was not/not their impression that the GODJ had been stonewalling UNHCR action. (NOTE: The UNHCR representative was on leave for some weeks during the summer, and only recently returned to Djibouti. This absence may have slowed on-the-ground

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coordination between the GODJ and UNHCR. END NOTE).

¶6. (C) COMMENT: The GODJ's willingness to let HRW interview defectors/deserters reflects their deep desire to have the international community help resolve the current situation. However, Eritrea's stubborn refusal to acknowledge the outbreak of hostilities with Djibouti presents a barrier to international efforts to discuss possible prisoner exchanges. Absent an accurate count of the number of Djiboutian POWs or MIA, or a definitive GODJ announcement of its intentions regarding possible prisoner exchanges, Eritrean defectors/deserters have a legitimate fear of being used as a bargaining chip. Post has previously encouraged the GODJ to "internationalize" the defectors/deserters, and will continue to urge the GODJ to work in close collaboration with UNHCR. END COMMENT.
WONG